

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY IN DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY ON PROPOSED ARIAL BEEL INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT PROJECT IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

This paper has dual objectives: to understand the importance of conflict sensitivity in development and to examine the relevance of conflict sensitivity in practical terms through a case study—the proposed Arial Beel International Airport Project. Written, based on secondary resources available in books, journal articles, and online sources, it argues that conflict-sensitive approaches to development pay attention to contextual realities to avoid any intentional and unintentional ‘harm’ that a context may face due to insensitive developmental intervention. On the Arial Beel case, it found that a localised, violent resistance movement developed against the decision to construct a modern airport due to inadequate attention to local realities and inappropriate pre-project development assessment processes. The government had to backtrack the project. However, at the latter stage, the decision-makers learned to respect local sensitivities while looking for alternative sites for an airport project. It suggests an insensitive development project that becomes unwanted too to locals could influence policymakers to learn about contextual sensitivities and respect the pulse of people on the ground.

Keywords: Conflict sensitivity, development process, top-down approach, local context, resistance movement, Arial Beel, Bangladesh.

Introduction

The issue of conflict sensitivity has become so profound in the contemporary post-conflict development and peacebuilding literature. The key to conflict sensitivity is that all development works, besides their intended positive contributions and impacts, could undermine peace and security and end up ‘fuelling conflict’ (Saferworld, 2008). This is a puzzle between undertaking development projects and their consequences. Under any circumstances, the authority, whether the government or local authority

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or donor agencies, can undertake a wide range of development programmes, including mega infrastructure projects, construction projects and humanitarian activities, which primarily aim to transform society positively. Development does not mean only economic growth and progress; it indicates a ‘good change,’ instead of a ‘bad change’ in any society (Chambers, 1997). Therefore, the intention of a development project is vital when the development outcome is considered a multi-faceted phenomenon that aims to do public welfare and positively change people’s lives and livelihoods (Cowen and Shenton, 1996).

One cannot ignore human-centric development is crucial for two reasons: empowerment of people from the local context to engage them in development process and use expertise from inside and outside, for better results (Hopper, 2018). However, developmental interventions are not risk-free as they could positively and negatively impact the country, environment, local population and generate responses from locals. This is a complexity in undertaking any development activities, although no one can understand its effects until a project begins or is completed. On this pretext, this exploratory paper aims to understand the importance of conflict-sensitivity in development intervention and to examine an initial proposal of a mega infrastructural project—the Arial Beel International Airport Project (ABIAP), to which the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) paid attention through which it envisioned a positive image of the country and projected people’s benefit.

The ABIAP that the GoB once considered and subsequently abandoned due to local resistance is the case. The ABIAP has not been studied from a conflict sensitivity perspective nor received adequate scholarly attention to understanding why the government backtracked from this project. In line with these, this paper addresses the main research question: why do any development interventions have to be sensitive to the local contexts? The article connects its answer with the case-specific question: how and to what extent did the proposed ABIAP pay attention to conflict sensitivity? The paper in the next section briefly reviews existing literature to identify a research gap. Thereafter, it explains the methodology of this study. The fourth section briefly introduces the case of the proposed ABIAP and explains its immediate consequence. After that, it provides an understanding of the concept of conflict sensitivity and its significance in developmental intervention and thus operationalises it for this paper. The sixth section analyses some vital aspects of conflict-sensitive approaches to development in the context of the ABIAP that the government finally had to shelve.

Literature review

Some policy-level assessments examine conflict sensitivity in development projects, although many of them focus on seeing how foreign development assistance could contribute to peace or aggravate conflicts. Brachet and Wolpe (2005) assessed the situation in Burundi and identified eight principles to guide development assistance in fragile contexts. An evaluation report examined post-conflict development and peacebuilding works in Sri Lanka, argued for meeting individual and localised needs for impacting the political level peace process, and suggested donor coherence in their interventions (Chapman *et al.*, 2009). Perera and MacSwiner (2002) argued for unbiased and sensitive donor intervention so that no anti-peace groups consider such assistance as partial to one group and exacerbate the identity-based conflict in Sri Lanka.

However, little has been written on the national development plan from a conflict sensitivity lens. Islam and Alam (2018) studied a few cases of development projects and examined the connections between mega-development projects and their relationship with resource scarcity and conflicts in Bangladesh. When people see pressure on their livelihood and a question of potential population displacement arises, they often go against the project (Islam and Alam, 2018). Not from an insensitive development perspective but from a neoliberal, privatised economic perspective, Chowdhury (2020) examined the 2006 Phulbari mining and resistance movement and argued that homegrown anti-mining agitation developed against foreign direct investment due to its environmental threats and livelihood concerns, unethical practice and development-induced displacement. These findings resemble Islam and Islam's (2009) conclusion that an open pit mining system of coal that negatively affected the environment and pressured people's 'survival strategies' contributed to a resistance movement. These studies mostly examined resource scarcity and its connections with resistance movements and violence during the project implementation phase. None of these studies has examined other underlying causes of the resistance movements, including insensitive project designing and policy-making processes. Hence, this paper attempts to address this literature gap by studying the proposed ABIAP, a national development project that the GoB once considered and later abandoned. It needs scholarly attention from conflict-sensitive development perspectives.

Methodology of the Study

Some studies in various parts of the world unpacked the concept of conflict sensitivity in any development projects and focused on conflict and tension

assessments before commissioning development interventions. Those have been used for setting the tone and farming the analytical framework of this case study—the proposed ABIAP in Bangladesh—to contribute to the existing knowledge of conflict-sensitive approaches to development. This is a case study of a national development project that went in a different direction due to insufficient attention to the context. For this case study, this paper used secondary resources to explain and develop its argument. Arial Beel case-specific facts, information and data have been collected from various sources that are available online, such as local, national and international newspaper reports and articles and blogs of different stakeholders who live in Bangladesh and outside. Besides these, it consulted books and journal papers for developing the theoretical perspective of conflict sensitivity and its application process. However, it could not contact any parties involved in the proposed ABIAP development process and subsequent resistance movement. Neither could it consult any government documents nor talk with any local inhabitants of the greater Arial Been area. Nonetheless, this case study is significant for understanding and learning conflict-sensitive approaches to development in non-conflict contexts like Bangladesh, where the government has ethical responsibilities and functional roles in planning and undertaking context-sensitive development projects.

An International Airport Project at the Arial Beel: A Development Proposal Consequentially Stopped

After winning the 2008 national election, the Awami League (AL) planned to construct a modern airport to reduce pressure on Dhaka international airport on the argument that it would benefit the country and connect East and West (Mamun, 2017). As a part of this development goal, in April 2010, the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism (MoCAT) forwarded a proposal to construct a high-end airport in Trishal, Mymensingh. The Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) sent a panel of experts to different areas—Mymensingh, Tangail and other districts, to select the site for a new international airport. Based on their recommendation, the MoCAT submitted this proposal to build this airport on 6,000 acres of land in Trishal (Islam, 2011). They considered the soil quality of this area appropriate for absorbing the high impacts that an airport could generate (Islam, 2011). However, the project suddenly halted before the top-level approval by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).

Some political leaders and government officials developed an argument for constructing this airport project somewhere near the south of Dhaka, where there

was no mega infrastructure project. Two senior officials from Munshiganj were instrumental in convincing the policymakers to set up this airport, named after Bangabandhu in Arial Beel (Islam, 2011). When they forwarded this proposal to policymakers, they increased the proposed project's size from 6,000 to 25,000 acres of land. They included a satellite city close to the airport, named after Bangabandhu (Islam, 2011). On 12 December 2010, a joint secretary, Joynal Abedin Talukder, made a multi-media presentation that visualised the comparative scenarios of various proposed sites of the airport project. Within two days, the PMO approved the Ariel Beel site and discarded the Trishal area (Dhaka Tribune, 2018).

The new project site, Arial Beel, with about an area of 136 square kilometres, has been a wetland on which many people have lived. The locals reacted to this proposed development plan when the district commissioner ordered land acquisition (Islam and Alam, 2018). A resentment, therefore, grew amongst the local population of the Munshiganj area as the government did not take responses from the local people for this mega project that required the acquisition of 25,000 acres of land (Mamun, 2017). It led to a daylong clash between the police and local demonstrators on 31 January 2011. The conflict broke out in the Srinagar area, leading to a policeman's death and injuring four cops and 100 local people (Munshigonj24.com, 06 February 2011; Munshigonj24.com, 02 February 2011). The demonstrators protested building up an international airport, which they saw as a challenge to their lives and livelihood. The situation only improved when Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina officially announced that this proposed international airport would not be in Munshiganj "if people do not want" (quoted in Islam & Tusher, 02 August 2011). Once the government halted the proposed project, the situation gradually improved.

Conflict Sensitivity in Development: Conceptual Understanding

The seminal work of Anderson (1999) has helped develop an argument amongst development practitioners that aid provided by donors in conflict-prone societies can reinforce divisions and cleavages between/among contending parties. Development agencies can exacerbate structural violence when they underestimate contextual realities (Uvin, 1998). It means security and development are interlinked when local people's protection and well-being issues are crucial (Jackson & Beswick, 2018). However, not all contexts are the same, so every context may not find similar approaches to undertaking development. What fits in African countries may not similarly be applied in Asia or Latin America. Therefore, development practitioners in every context consider societal and contextual realities to avoid

unintentional consequences. In-sensitive interventions cause more harm than good to local inhabitants, leading to resistance movement development causing damage to the society, state and its wealth, including property and population.

However, development practitioners popularise the concept of conflict sensitivity. Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) (2017) defines a conflict-sensitive approach in a way that pays attention to ‘careful analysis, design and monitoring of the possible positive and negative impacts’ of any development interventions. The core principle of conflict-sensitive development includes a participatory approach that broadly means inclusiveness, transparency and accountability (SIDA, 2017). As this approach indicates inclusiveness, it suggests a partnership approach that connects both the development authority and development beneficiary, which helps address any unwanted event that may arise from development interventions (Wolff *et al.*, 2020). Development programmes that do not pay attention to local realities can increase tension and aggravate situations even in stable conditions. For example, European Union supported mega commercial farming projects in Ethiopia, contributed to growing inequality and restricted people’s access to natural resources. Thus, it created tensions between various pastoralist groups and between the state and pastoralists (Saferworld, 2000). Therefore, when applying conflict sensitive lens in development, one focuses on reducing the risks of unintentional development consequences so that situation does not deteriorate (meaning ‘do any harm’) and contributes positively to sustainable development (Paffenholz, 2005).

The concept of conflict sensitivity in development, therefore, indicates an approach that pays attention to carefully designing and implementing development programmes and projects so that such activities do not harm society. Moreover, it aims to avoid or reduce the risks of potential conflicts and maximise the impacts of development interventions by using the opportunities available to prevent unintentional escalation of the tense situation created as a result of development activities. One can understand such an interaction only through context analysis and context-specific developmental assessment. There are a few principles of conflict sensitivity in practice that include: (i) an understanding of the context as much as possible before (throughout the planning and designing stages) undertaking development, (ii) an acknowledgement of the fact that development interventions have both positive and negative impacts, (iii) a participatory and inclusive context analysis, as well as development interventions, (iv) authority’s accountability for actions and inventions, and (v) a coordinated approach of working with relevant stakeholders (both people and authorities) to increase

positive impacts and reduce adverse effects as much as possible (Groenewald, 2009). Although maintaining conflict sensitivity is not easy, the operationalisation of conflict-sensitive approaches to development depends on some fundamental elements. These are: (i) ‘understand the context’ where development works are designed to be undertaken, (ii) ‘understand the interaction between’ the context and development intervention, and (iii) ‘act upon the understanding of this interaction’ (Roth, 2004). These are crucial to ‘avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts’ of any development process (Roth, 2004).

Understanding the context for development planning

The ‘context’ in development means the environment where development projects and activities would occur. Various existing socio-economic issues and tensions, including political or ethnic lines of division, are vital for consideration before planning and designing development projects. Multiple causes and structural factors remain present in a context that could aggravate the situation or create new tensions if not armed conflict. Therefore, the first element of a sensitive development approach is knowing the context, which connects with other associated components. Without any assessment, one cannot understand the context. Hence, context analysis must be a regular process so that development authorities know every development and change in the context (SIDA, 2017). The more they know the context, the better its execution will be.

Understanding the interaction between development intervention and local context

Understanding the potential ‘interaction between the intervention and the context’ is vital for maximising the positive effects of a development project and reducing its adverse impact (Roth, 2004). The aims and purposes of development intervention could be doing public welfare, but when authority fails to assess local realities, which could lead to unwanted outcomes and consequences. The interaction between developmental purposes and the effects of interventions determines the sustainability of a project. Diverse actors may be at play and could use developmental resources, thus bringing more complexities to the development process.

States undertake infrastructure projects to advance national goals and sustainable development, which could create unwanted interaction with its beneficiaries. Locals would resist such interventions if infrastructure development projects were deemed less/unproductive and unsupportive to local people. If mega infrastructure projects do not win the ‘hearts and minds’ of local people, they could cause growing

discontent among them (Mashatt, Long & Crum, 2008). Thus, such development projects create space for various other actors to exploit the situation at the cost of public welfare, suffering and lives. Moreover, when development interventions take place during peacetime for people's interest, which demands consultation with the local population. Their participation is fundamental to consolidating their benefits. Without including a local voice, such a development approach runs the risk of resistance and instability, if not violence.

Informed development planning and scope of revisiting its design and execution

There is an interplay between development intervention and context; therefore, a development project and its planning, design and implementation must follow an informed approach—meaning that the development practitioners know the actual contextual realities. Consequently, they design projects based on contextual facts, although a misjudged and wrongly assessed context could lead to unwanted consequences. Therefore, a pre-project development assessment is vital for any development interventions. Without conducting such assessments, development actors pour money into complex contexts that create more complexities, generate security problems, fail to prevent violence and lose control of the development projects (Goodhand, 2010; Dahl & Hoylund, 2012). Any development authorities can plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate activities based on such analysis. These help them to have control over their interventions. It is an open learning process that permits organisations to revisit their implementation strategy, adapt to the context when required and develop the 'ability to deal with uncertainty' (Roth, 2004: 3). Such an adaptive capacity is crucial for addressing unwanted events that originate at any stage.

Conflict Sensitivity in Practice: Analysis of the Proposed Arial Beel International Airport Project and its Consequences

Analysing a national development project from a conflict sensitivity lens is daunting, although it is not impossible to examine any development project from such a perspective. This section focuses on four key thematic areas to analyse the aspects of conflict sensitivity of the proposed ABIAP.

Contextual understanding and informed project planning: Site selection of the proposed Arial Beel airport scheme

For a conflict-sensitive development approach, two issues are vital: conducting a context analysis to understand the socio-economic conditions of the area and

consultation with local people to inform them about a project's tangible and intangible benefits. The proposed ABIAP was developed and decided suddenly by a quarter of powerful local political actors and government officials (Islam, 2011). They wanted to shift the proposed airport site from Trishal to Arial Beel. When Trishal was looming on the horizon, a pre-feasibility committee quickly went to some other sites, such as Faridpur, Madaripur, Shariatpur and Munshiganj, on 15 November 2011 to find an alternative place for this project. On 30 November of the same year, the committee finalised Arial Beel for the proposed international airport project (Morshed, 2011).

One can ask a question about the task of this pre-feasibility committee—how quickly they made up their mind to select Arial Beel from these four sites. Another efficient question is whether or not it was feasible to conduct assessments of four locations within two weeks. Constructing an international airport needs a comprehensive, methodical analysis of the context to understand its various aspects, which was missing in the case of Arial Beel. They placed the project to PMO without adequate assessments of Arial Beel, convinced the PMO to build an international airport and proposed to extend the project site from 6,000 to 25,000 acres of land for setting up a satellite city adjacent to the airport.

Nobody conducted a proper feasibility study on whether Arial Beel covering huge wetlands could offer such a massive space for an airport and its adjacent satellite city. Although it was close to Dhaka city, Arial Beel has been considered one of the top three wetlands in Bangladesh that may not be suitable for such a mega project that would generate a high impact on the lands (Bridger, 2018). However, it was a bureaucratic, top-down approach to decision-making that managed quick approval from the PMO. No public diplomacy took place to gain local support for the project (Morshed, 2011). Due to their lack of participation in the decision-making process, locals felt neglected, stayed in darkness and could not find its link to the local context.

Any mega projects need a wide range of assessments and long-term planning. Morshed (2011) stated: 'There is a laundry list of things-to-do before the decision to implement a mega project (like an airport) could be made, such as land-use planning; operational and security aspect; interference with existing road network; impacts from earthwork; hydraulic works; structural requirements; impacts on historical and archaeological resources; environmental impacts; and air pollution and noise impacts.' No Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the project and land associated with the Beel was done. One blogger, Khondkar A Saleque

(16 February 2011) raised questions on various grounds and stated: ‘Without detailed feasibility study and EIA it was unwise to embark on land acquisition for a mega project We do not understand why a democratic popular government takes such immature initiative which creates controversy.... No large project in Bangladesh is initiated without EIA ... Who were so enthusiasts? Why was the government made to be embarrassed?’ One questioned the government’s role in respecting various National Water Policy clauses (Roder Chele, 15 January 2011). These issues and questions have merits as the whole natural life of the Beel, which includes human livelihood, fishing and farming, rich biodiversity, and water use for irrigation, was not appropriately considered before selecting the site for a mega airport project (Bridger, 2018; Hasan, 2017). Due to insufficient contextual knowledge and inappropriate pre-project development assessments, the proposal did not get attention from the locals. Without considering these issues, any project could face impediments.

Project interaction with local contexts: Contributions and cost-effectiveness of the proposed airport project

The proposed ABIAP aimed to positively impact the economy and society and contribute to national economic development. Besides meeting the growing needs and demands of passengers, the airport could connect the East and West so that many international flights could use it as a connecting hub, once the then Aviation Minister, Rashed Khan Menon, stated (Mamun, 2017). A section of policymakers welcomed this project as it would generate employment opportunities for many locals and outsiders and create a conducive environment for expanding various other businesses (Ray, 13 February 2011). Besides its improved connectivity, roads, and railway connections with Dhaka, new amenities like hospitals, universities, and markets with modern facilities could benefit locals. Such opportunities would positively impact people’s lives, including their unique jobs and employment opportunities (Ray, 13 February 2011). Non-resident Bangladeshis expressed excitement about having such an airport; its adjacent satellite city, IT hub, textile hub, a new expressway and monorail system to connect with Dhaka were lucrative for business expansion.

The state wanted to compensate the people of the site for sacrificing their land. The then Minister of Urban Development stated that legal landowners could get 5-10 Katha land in the project area, which would be highly valuable for them in future (Ray, 13 February 2011). However, the people who do not have legal land rights in the Beel area would face difficulty getting any reparation. It was a

genuine concern for many people living on Arial Beel who had no legal authority on the land. Therefore, they developed an alternative narrative and took an anti-Arial Beel airport project, leading to unwanted consequences, including sporadic violence between the local people and law enforcement agencies.

However, questions were raised on various grounds, including the necessity of a new airport and its high cost when building it in a low-lying swamp Beel with an average depth of 20 feet. A blogger named Sochol Zahid (29 December 2010) argued that instead of going for such an ambitious project, the government must focus on improving the conditions and quality of existing international airports. Instead of utilising the full potential of Shahjalal International Airport and enhancing the capacities of two other international and five domestic airports, why was it necessary to spend TK50,000 (\$7 billion) for a new airport was asked by another blogger, Dinmojur (31 December 2010). It was an ambitious project for a country like Bangladesh with various other socio-economic issues, needs and deficiencies. Moreover, improving the facilities of different airports and enhancing staff capacity and skills would cost much less than the budget for a new international airport. This enormous spending on an airport project created confusion and ambiguity (Save the Arial Beel, Undated).

The Trishal site would have been more cost-saving than the Arial Beel spot constructing an airport. A geologist argued: ‘There are technologies which would allow constructing high impact structures in low lying lands. But, that costs extra money. Why do we need to spend this extra money?’ (Quoted in Islam, 2011). He also asked where the flood water would go if an airport were constructed (Islam, 2011). This connects with issues of water management of the Beel, which has connections to three rivers—Padma, Dhaleshwari and Ichhamoti and 18 canals. Therefore, it could impact regional flood control systems in low-lying land. The annual flood could be costlier than the airport project for the people of this region.

Moreover, constructing an ambitious airport would evict and displace more than ten thousand people, including the landowners and some immigrants who came to this area due to riverbank erosion, poverty, Monga and other socio-economic hardships (Hasan, 2017; Islam, 2011). It would jeopardise the local economy, life and biodiversity. Hence, people expressed their concerns about their life and livelihood. The government considered the economic development and growth of the country. In contrast, people questioned the significant spending for a new airport and the potential eviction of locals from their ancestral lands.

Project interaction with local context: Resistance movement, casualty and growing mistrust

Some effects of a development project could be more harmful and visible anytime—during the project planning or implementation stage. The proposed ABIAP experienced immediate adverse effects during the project planning and designing phase. It received negative attention from the world when a resistance movement grew in the locality led by local inhabitants. The potential positive impacts of this project were not immediately visible to locals, nor were any authorities communicating such long-term effects to them. Due to their non-participation and non-consultation with authority, locals remained in darkness and developed vague assumptions. Hence, the locals did not want such a mega project in their locality. They feared a severe impact on lives and livelihood and potential development-induced displacement and eviction, especially those who did not have legal rights on land but lived on Arial Beel. Therefore, locals started a protest movement that escalated rapidly.

Local people formed the Arial Beel Protection Committee (ABPC) that carried out the campaign against this luxurious project on different grounds, including its adverse effects on people and their livelihoods. Very quickly, they went for a protest movement; the state deployed a police force that attempted to prevent and tackle the anti-airport campaign and wanted to stop people from joining it (Bridger, 2018). Both parties took positions in the street to tackle each other. As a result, a clash with violence evolved on 26 January 2011, injuring 30 people and vitalising vehicles and shops (Bridger, 2018).

The protest movement became political when the then-opposition party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), extended its support to the campaign against this project. A blogger, Saleque (15 February 2011), argued that the inclusion of the name Bangabandhu in this project created ‘further controversy’ for many locals. BNP, which had a stronghold in the greater Munshiganj area, took it as a political project of the AL government. Therefore, BNP took an anti-airport project stand, fuelling the debate and tension over project planning. Once BNP supported this campaign, the event turned more violent (Bridger, 2018). Nevertheless, the locals saw the bonding with the soil and land they had lived in for years and were ready to sacrifice their lives to protect their land (Morshed, 2011).

Once violence, vandalism and injuries became integral to the anti-airport campaign, police filed cases against thousands of local people that escalated the tension. The state used legal means to control the movement and agitated locals to

a considerable extent. In response to the clash between police and demonstrators on 26 January, the ABPC arranged another demonstration that included a road blockade programme on the Dhaka-Mawa highway. This call for protest became further complicated due to the actions and counter-actions of police and local protestors (Bridger, 2018). The more police involved in preventing the protest campaign, the more complicated the movement became. Police as state agents used coercive means, including rubber bullets that injured three protesters, and the situation rapidly escalated.

On 31 January 2011, ABPC called for another protest movement, including a road blockade. Due to various events and developments, locals motivated more people to join the anti-airport movement. More than 30,000 local protesters joined the campaign and blocked the roads with logs, tyres and firewood, which they used to set fire to the street (Bridger, 2018). Many came with wooden sticks and bamboo to attack police and law enforcement agencies. A scenario of total violent chaos evolved; an unruly crowd torched a police outpost in Hashara located 10 Kilometres from Arial Beel, and many attacked media (The Daily Star, 01 February 2011a; 2011b). In this chaotic situation, the state deployed more police forces from other stations, using rubber bullets and teargas to contain violence and disperse the protesters. During the spree of clashes and violence, a policeman, Sub-Inspector (SI) Motiur Rahman, was killed. Approximately one hundred people, including protesters, journalists, and law enforcement agency personnel, got injured (Mamun, 2017; Bridger, 2018).

Violence invites more violence when conflicting parties do not restrain themselves. Clashes are inevitable when people protest to safeguard their subsistence economy from state intervention. Morshed (2011) stated: ‘the fierce street fight between the local people and law-enforcement personnel on Dhaka-Mawa highway and other locations in Munshiganj were not simply about the airport project any longer. There seemed to be something deeper in it, like the rural-urban disconnect and centre-periphery tension.’ Such a type of violent resistance to development-induced potential displacement is that people living on agriculture and Ariel Beel were not ready to accept state-centric mega-development projects—whatever benefits such a project could bring to them (Morshed, 2011). Due to locals’ preference for land and subsistence over economic development and growth, such a violent clash was inevitable.

When police lost one of their colleagues in the movement, they filed multiple cases against the locals (Munshigonj24.com, 06 February 2011). Besides the law

and order demands of such cases, those were for bringing responsible to justice, especially those involved in the anti-airport campaign, violence, vandalism and killing of an officer. Police raided houses and beat up villagers in the following days, forcing many male inhabitants into a hideout; many stayed inside the Beel at night, while others took shelter in adjacent villages (Munshigonj24.com, 06 February 2011). Police, however, arrested 14 suspects concerning the anti-airport campaign, associated protest movement and violence (Tusher, 2011). As a result of the violent events and post-violence lawsuits, drives and arrests, a sense of mistrust developed between the police and local people.

Scope of revisiting the project: Addressing local concerns and rethinking the ABIAP

When a development project does not go accordingly, the state has to take measures to rectify it. Intelligent politicians and decision-makers prefer pragmatic choices to stick to the original plan to reduce unintended consequences. Without such a sensible choice, a situation leads to more suffering for all parties. PM Sheikh Hasina was no exception, as she understood the local people's position and pulse. She quickly decided to scrap the plan of constructing an international airport in Arial Beel (Tusher, 2011). She valued listening to locals without prejudice. Without such an understanding, the state could not execute a massive project for the welfare of the people and country. The outcry this proposed project created amongst the locals forced the government to give it up.

The top decision-makers of the country did not want to go against the will of the local people. The PM said there would be no airport in Arial Beel 'if people do not want.' This statement profoundly means respecting local sensitivity and respecting local will, opinion and perspective. Such a declaration by the PM was a genuine indication that AL would not go against the local people's will to foster development, although those who 'instigated' the movement failed to understand the significance of this project (Tusher, 03 February 2011). The PM requested the concerned authority to look for other places suitable for setting up an international airport, possibly on the other side of the Padma.

Once the PM discarded the proposed ABIAP, the local administration quickly moved to restore harmony with the local people and communities. They understood the pulse of the government and acted accordingly. The Sreenagar Upazila administration organised a harmonising relationship meeting with locals, attended by local teachers, villagers, a local Member of Parliament (MP) and high-ranked

police personnel. The MP assured ‘no harassment’ of local people concerning the anti-airport demonstration and movement, while the District Commissioner said, ‘We’re with you’ (Munshigonj24.com, 06 February 2011). Such a kind of social bridging meeting was highly relevant in post-violence contexts to restore stability and regain the local population’s confidence in offering services to them through administrative service. It is a process of rebuilding the relationship between the top and bottom levels, a vital aspect of conflict-sensitive development operations. The turmoil and violent protest sent the decision-makers a message that without an appropriate feasibility and needs assessment, any development project could face any consequence, the way the proposed ABIAP did experience in 2011.

The PM also emphasised conducting a proper feasibility study for shifting the airport site (Tusher, 03 February 2011). Once the government moved away from the Arial Beel site, it focused on the feasibility assessment of some potential other areas. Following evaluations of a few locations, Nippon Koei Ltd. forwarded a proposal that suggested Char Janajat as a feasible alternative site, which did not convince the PM. She expressed concerns over the site of Bangabandhu Airport on an island in the river on the ground that was close to residential areas (Dhaka Tribune, 2018). She emphasised not harming the local people of Bangladesh, where people value their ancestral land more than development projects. The decision-makers have learned not to repeat the consequence like in Arial Beel. They had received a message from Arial Beel that relocating people from their land is daunting with other associated local socio-economic and political complexities.

The PM stated: ‘I do not think it will be feasible to relocate people from the possible construction site. So, we are conducting more surveys for finding a more suitable area. The airport project will move forward once we find a site through the ongoing surveys’ (Quoted in Dhaka Tribune, 2018). The GoB, however, prioritised ‘build[ing] a third terminal at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport’ so that it could take additional loads of passengers and flights and become a bridging point between the East and the West (Dhaka Tribune, 2018). The debacle that the proposed ABIAP made was a lesson for all actors who later became aware of proper feasibility study of the project site and its potential consequences.

Conclusion

Conflict sensitivity is a prerequisite of contemporary development interventions—planned, designed and implemented under any context by any authorities. Conflict-sensitive approaches to development pay attention to local contexts to understand the

complex interplays of various factors and actors so that development interventions can minimise unwanted, unpleasant consequences but maximise positive impacts. These are vital for project planning, designing and implementation stages to avoid harm to the context. The more decision-makers consider context sensitivities, the better the development process becomes. Therefore, understanding the context, understanding the interaction of development interventions with the local context and knowing the scope of revisiting a plan for the betterment of local people are vital for conflict sensitivity in practical terms.

This paper has exciting findings on the conflict-sensitive approach to development and argues that an insensitive mega-development proposal can aware development planners of conflict sensitivities. The proposed ABIAP, to a great extent, was insensitive as the development planners failed to consider contextual sensitivities at the initial stage to set up an international airport in a wetland with rich biodiversity. They relied more on inappropriate feasibility studies and decided hastily without consulting with the local people. Due to lacking local public consultancy, they could not make local people aware of its benefits and challenges. A myopic, top-down bureaucratic approach to selecting a site (shifting from Trishal to Arial Beel), non-consultation with locals, and inadequate feasibility study of the Arial Beel site contributed to the debacle of this project. As a result, a local resistance movement developed against the ABIAP.

The decision-makers emphasised national development, whereas people on the ground considered it differently, linking it with their genuine concerns of potential development-induced eviction from their ancestral land and subsistence economy. Hence, this development proposal interacted negatively with the local context. Thus, a fierce resistance movement involved many local stakeholders, including political opposition and residents. The proactive role of an unruly section led to violence and vandalism, while the state applied coercive means that complicated the situation further and brought casualties. Due to local resistance, the top decision-makers had to backtrack the project in Arial Beel. At the latter stage, decision-makers paid utmost attention to conflict sensitivities and appropriate assessments for selecting a suitable site so that it does not cause harm or experience what it experienced in Arial Beel. The debacle in Arial Beel messages that an insensitive development project that becomes unwanted to locals made the decision-makers aware of contextual sensitivities. The backward turn of the government from Arial Beel essentially was a forward movement toward a conflict-sensitive development approach.

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